



## News Release

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### **Safety Message Targets Teen Drivers** *State and Local Agencies Focus on Crash Prevention*

(Salt Lake City, UT) – Motor vehicle crashes continue to injure and kill Utah teens all too often. This year, one of every 36 teens ages 15-19 will be treated in an emergency room for motor vehicle crash injuries. Public health agencies and the Utah Teen Driving Safety Task Force say the time has come to ramp up efforts to change teens' deadly behavior.

“Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for 15-19 year-olds in Utah and this simply is not acceptable,” stated Dr. George Delavan, Director of Community and Family Health Services of the Utah Department of Health (UDOH). “So UDOH, Utah’s 12 local health departments and the Task Force are focusing safety efforts on teens. We also need to devote more resources to promising education and media campaigns,” Delavan said.

In a press conference at Cottonwood High School, the partners emphasized the importance of getting parents involved in their teens' safety.

RJ, the parent of a bright, fun-loving 17-year-old, shared how her family's lives changed when her daughter was involved in a fatal motor vehicle crash. It was just before midnight on December 22, 2006, when RJ got the call every parent of a teen driver fears. Her daughter Cynthia had been involved in a head-on collision. RJ raced to the crash scene but, by the time she arrived, Cynthia had died.

“Cynthia was not wearing a seat belt that night and unfortunately, she was also talking on her cell phone,” said RJ. “If there is one message I would like to get across to teens it would be to always buckle up and hang up your cell phone while driving.” RJ wants to see these warnings reinforced in driver education training as well.

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Health officials agree with RJ. “By focusing our energies on teen drivers and coordinating with programs like drivers’ ed, we believe we can begin to reverse this growing problem,” said Jennifer Trujillo, Health Educator with the Salt Lake Valley Health Department.

Terry Smith, Health Promotion Director for the Central Utah Health Department, says increased funding is also critical to the effort. “We’ve been running our community prevention programs with minimal budgets for years, and an infusion of funds would go a long way toward helping us get the message out to our teenagers.”

According to the Utah Department of Public Safety, speeding was the biggest contributor to fatal teen-driver crashes in 2005. And crashes where the teen-driven vehicle carried four or more occupants were five times more likely to be fatal than crashes involving vehicles with fewer occupants.

Wearing a seat belt is one of the best ways to reduce injuries and deaths in a motor vehicle crash. “Parents should set rules for teen drivers that include always wearing a seatbelt and insisting that any passengers buckle up,” said Gary Mower, spokesman for the UDOH Violence and Injury Prevention Program.

Additional UDOH recommendations include:

- Increase enforcement of existing seatbelt laws
- Implement policies at high schools that make parking privileges contingent on student seatbelt use, maintaining a clean driving record, and attending a safe driving class.
- Increase requirements for beginning drivers, including more practice time behind the wheel with a licensed adult driver prior to getting a license.
- Increase education campaigns targeting drivers ages 15-19
- Restrict cell phone and MP3 player use, text messaging, loud music, food and friends in the car while driving. All are dangerous distractions that play a role in crashes.
- Increase parental involvement to supplement formal driver education training, establish common driving rules, and a parent/teen driver contract that, if broken, will lead to revocation of driving privileges.

For more information on teen driving safety tips, visit <http://www.health.utah.gov/vipp/>.

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